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ABC's Old News

On June 3, ABC News marked the tenth anniversary of the death of J. Edgar Hoover with an hour-long documentary that was remarkable on a number of counts.

From this program, which never would have been aired while he was alive and a media sacred cow, millions of television viewers learned—many probably for the first time—that, as ABC correspondent Marshall Frady concluded, “what happened with Hoover is a troubling parable of how the guardians of our safety can come to most endanger our freedoms.” Hoover was shown to have used secret police powers to further his own ambitions; to have misled Congress and the Warren Commission; to have falsified evidence and official reports; and to have orchestrated a massive campaign, as Frady put it, “conducted through illegal surveillance, burglaries, harassment, political sabotage and directed—the best authorities say—against many thousands of innocent citizens.”

Now for the bad news. The week before, ABC put out a press release emphasizing that its investigation of Hoover's career had “uncovered new information about the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg espionage case”; that it obtained evidence about their guilt “never made public” from Robert Lamphere, “the FBI official in charge of KGB espionage cases in the 1940s and 1950s”; and that “secret KGB messages intercepted by American intelligence confirmed to the U.S. government that the Rosenbergs were guilty of leaking U.S. atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.” ABC added that its documentary “reveals for the first time through an identified source that the decoded KGB messages gave the government convincing evidence of the guilt of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. The couple, along with some 200 (!) Soviet spies, was apprehended after a code expert in the old Army Security Agency cracked the highly secret Soviet spy codes in 1948.” The press release reports that the code expert had worked “with charred remains of a Soviet code book found on a World War II Finnish battlefield.” This startling “new evidence,” according to the release, was withheld at the Rosenberg's trial “to prevent the Soviets from discovering that American experts had broken the KGB code.”

On the basis of the release and an interview with ABC's Patricia Lynch, investigative reporter for the program, *The New York Times* ran a three-column story on May 27 saying: “A former official of the Federal Bureau of Investigation has asserted that the United States broke Soviet spy codes in the 1940s and that this led to knowledge of the involvement of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in an atomic espionage conspiracy, ABC News said yesterday.” Lynch was quoted as saying that Lamphere “had finally gotten clearance” on a book he had been trying to get approval for since 1977, and that the surprising revelations about the cracking of the Soviet code had been told to ABC by “in-

This story—proclaimed by ABC as a scoop containing information never before made public—is in fact at least five years old, and was first reported and attributed to Robert Lamphere in an Associated Press dispatch from Washington on October 27, 1977 (see *The New York Times*, October 28, 1977). *Newsweek* devoted a full page to the story under a picture of the Rosenbergs and the headline “Cracking the Soviet Cipher,” in its issue of May 19, 1980. And in his 1980 book, *Wilderness of Mirrors*, David C. Martin told the story with embellishments, omitting only the name of Lamphere (whom Martin later identified as the source).

As for the program itself, its “documentation” for the startling assertions about how the Rosenbergs' guilt was established is offered to the viewer as follows: (1) an old film clip is shown of an otherwise unidentified Army security agency building outside Washington; (2) the camera moves across the text of a book containing rows of numbers (not otherwise identified) while Marshall Frady explains that “raw data like this” is what enabled a U.S. code expert to crack the Soviet spy code; and (3) Robert Lamphere appears on camera to say that “there can be no question about their guilt” because the F.B.I. knew “of the Rosenbergs' involvement with the Soviets through KGB messages, through the testimony of numerous people.”

Although Patricia Lynch is quoted in *The Times* as saying that unidentified intelligence and Justice Department sources corroborated Lamphere's story, Justice Department attorney David Glass advised U.S. District Court Judge June Green in Washington on June 1 that it had never released any such material on the Rosenbergs to Lamphere—and, if it had, it would also have had to go to Marshall Perlin, the lawyer for the Rosenberg children. Perlin has told me that in none of the material he has received from any government agency has he ever seen anything hinting at a connection between the Rosenbergs and Soviet code books, broken or otherwise.

Lamphere appears to be ABC's only source, and his information is sparse indeed. As evidence—offered for the first time thirty-one years after the Rosenbergs' trial, twenty-nine years after their execution—what ABC is flaunting does not add up to much. Can it be that although J. Edgar is dead, his dirty tricks department lives on in the media?

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